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Guidelines

Mass Gathering for Youm-e-Ali During COVID-19 Pandemic

Objective

To provide guidelines to the health authorities, religious leaders, faith-based organizations, faith communities and national organizers of mass gatherings on education, preparedness, and response to reduce the risks of COVID-19 transmission associated with mass gatherings on Youm-e-Ali.

Rationale

Public gatherings amplify transmission of COVID-19 and can potentially disrupt the country's response capacity. Like previous year, Youm-e-Ali processions (jaloos) remain prohibited in order to protect health of our people. Open-air majalis may be organized in accordance with Standard Operating Procedures to minimize chances of spread of COVID-19.

Role of Religious Leaders in COVID-19 Education

Religious leaders and communities should ensure that accurate information is shared with communities regarding preventive measure for COVID-19 and address the misinformation.

Preparations-Administrative and Logistics

Local and national health authorities are the primary source of information and advice about COVID-19 in communities. They provide information about locally mandated restrictions on the movement of people, whether gatherings are permitted and, if so, of what size.

EVALUATION OF THE RISK FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH MASS GATHERING

- Establishing direct links and channels of communication between event organizers, health authorities, and other relevant authorities.
- Establishing collaboration and coordination mechanisms among all stakeholders, partners, and constituencies involved in the event.
- Making provisions for detecting and monitoring event-related cases of COVID-19, reducing the spread of the virus, managing ill persons, disseminating public health messages specific to COVID-19 in culturally appropriate ways and in languages used by community.



ASSESSMENT OF CAPACITIES AND RESOURCES

- Making provisions for human resources, procurement of personal protective equipment and other medical consumables, cleaning schedules, etc., in close coordination with national and local health authorities, and other relevant authorities.
- Modify the characteristics of the event such as venue, attendees, facilities, equipment as per requirement.
- Focus on the capacity of health and other relevant authorities and organizers to strengthen preparedness and response to a public health issue that occurs before, during, or after the mass gathering event.

Protocol

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure the availability of thermal guns at entrance and allow individuals only after checking their temperature.
- Do not allow any individual to enter the premises without face mask, provision (sale or distribution) of face masks at entry should be arranged.
- Maintain a safe distance of at least 1 meter (3 feet) from each other indoors as well as outdoors.
- Ensure availability of handwashing facilities with soap and water and/or hand rub dispensers with alcohol-based (70%) hand sanitizer.
- Do not allow the individuals with COVID-19 symptoms (sore throat, cough, fever) and contacts of known COVID-19 cases during their period of quarantine, to attend the majlis.
- Advising people with higher risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g., aged ≥ 50 years or with pre-existing medical conditions, children), and individuals in contact with higher-risk patients (e.g., residents in same household, long term care facility employees etc.) to not attend the majlis.
- Visual reminders on SOPs, actions, and steps to be followed during majlis.
- Individuals who develop symptoms after the event should, in addition to seeking medical advice, contact public health authorities about their potential exposure.
- Liaison between event organizers and health authorities is required to ensure that systems are in place to detect cases arising in the local population because of the event.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR MAJLIS

- Majlis may be relayed online. If a gathering is planned, it should be held outdoors.
- Gatherings in enclosed spaces are prohibited.
- Organizers to provide face masks to those participants who arrive without face mask. Hand sanitizers should also be made available.
- Participants to wear masks appropriately, covering both nose and mouth; observe physical distancing, respiratory/cough etiquette, and hand hygiene.



- The religious scholar (Aalim/ Zakir) must only be allowed to address the gatherings in-person after having a negative COVID19 PCR or Rapid Antigen Test.
- Pulpit (Mimbar) must be at least 3 feet away from the audience.
- Mark spaces with at least 3 feet (1 meter) distance in either direction for seating of participants.
- Ensure regular and thorough cleaning and disinfection (with bleach) of the venue by designated staff.
- Keep the duration of the event to a minimum to limit contact among participants.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRAYERS

- Thermal screening for all worshippers and provision of hand sanitizer at gate of mosque/ imam bargah.
- The waiting time between the call to prayer and the actual prayer is limited to 10 minutes to avoid overcrowding.
- Windows and doors of the mosque/ imam bargah should be kept open for good ventilation during the prayer.
- Worshippers should bring their own prayer mat (janamaz) and not leave them behind after the prayer.
- Worshippers must maintain at least 1 meter distance between each other, and every other row should be left empty.
- In mosques and imam bargahs where there is a courtyard prayer will be offered outdoors.
- Those older than 50 years, adolescents, children and those suffering from flu, cough etc. should not come to mosques or imam bargah.

AVOID PHYSICAL CONTACT

- Replace hugs and handshakes with a bow or peace sign or using a greeting in sign language while maintaining physical distance.
- Any form of culturally and religiously sanctioned alternative that avoids physical contact should be adopted.

PREVENT TOUCHING OR KISSING OF DEVOTIONAL OBJECTS

- Witness sacred icons from a distance instead of touching them.
- Receive blessing from at least 1 meter away; avoid distribution of unwrapped edibles and drinking from a common cup.
- Individual pre-packaged boxes/servings of religious or ceremonial foods may be distributed instead of servings from communal containers.
- Worshippers to perform their ritual ablutions at home before attending the prayers or majlis.
- Place alcohol-based hand-rub (at least 70% alcohol) at the entrance and in the worship space.



Note: The above recommendations are being regularly reviewed by the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations & Coordination and will be updated based on the international & national recommendations and best practices.

The Ministry acknowledges the contribution of Syeda Shehirbano Akhtar and HSA/ HPSIU/ NIH team to compile these guidelines.

References:

1. World Health Organization. Practical considerations and recommendations for religious leaders and faith-based communities in the context of COVID-19, Interim guidance, April 2020
2. CDC, Get Your Mass Gatherings or Large Community Events Ready for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), Interim Guidance

For more information, please contact:

HSA/ HPSIU/ NIH, PM National Health Complex, Islamabad

<http://covid.gov.pk/>

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<https://www.nih.org.pk/>

<https://www.youtube.com/NHSRC-PK>